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AUTHOR Lux, Claudia
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses personnel management issues that arose when the East Berlin (Germany) Municipal Library and the West Berlin America Memorial Library united in 1995 to form the Central and State Library. The first section provides historical background on the two libraries and their merger. The second section summarizes the East-West conflict as generally present in Berlin and the defining aspects of this conflict among staff at the unified Central and State Library including: euphoria; disillusionment and mistrust; the beginning of the third phase of mutual recrimination; the first phase of understanding, where misapprehensions are recognized; and the second phase of understanding, in which the respective ethical systems are understood, learned, and respected. The third section describes the following measures related to unification that have been introduced in order to mitigate the East-West conflict: (1) external leadership; (2) complete neutrality; (3) common long-term goal; (4) short-term improvements in service with mixed staffing; (5) reaching understanding of different points of view by working together; (6) different clientele required different behavior; (7) clear decisions, anticipation of difficulties resulting from compromises; (8) improving the information culture; (9) conscious fostering of changes in behavior to each other; (10) changing the nature of discussions; (11) delegating responsibility to the shop floor; and (12) unanimity is neither achievable nor necessary, acceptability will do. (MES)

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Managing library staff from a different cultural background - the East-West conflict in Berlin

Claudia Lux
Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin
(Berlin Central and Regional Library)
Berlin, Germany

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Abstract

After the fall of the Berlin wall in November 1989 the time of euphorie didn't last very long. When the staff of the East-Berlin City-Library and the West-Berlin America-Memorial Library was united in a new organisation called Berlin Central and Regional Library in 1995 the situation had already changed. Misunderstanding or blaming each other were normal habitudes between east and west. To come to a deeper understanding of the staff from a different cultural background was a challenge for the management of the united library. They mainly focused on twelve important points to develop the organisation together with the staff.

Paper

Nearly ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, the differences between East and West in Germany have still not completely disappeared. After Reunification in autumn 1990 Berlin's libraries were very quick to establish common associations and bodies between the East and the West. Many institutions which were once duplicated in the two halves of the city were unified. However it was only five years later, in autumn 1995, that the unification of the two central libraries of the city came about. The normal conflict which arises when two institutions are merged - as is commonly seen today in banks and businesses everywhere - was thus overlaid with the East-West conflict, marking the way the merger of these libraries developed and making particular demands on the management.
Forward-looking changes at the Central and State Library had, therefore, three elements to

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take into account:

a. the history of the two libraries;

b. the East-West conflict that was generally present in Berlin;

c. new approaches to conflict resolution.

A. A potted history of the two libraries, the Berlin Municipal Library and the America Memorial Library, which merged to form the Central and State Library.

Berlin Municipal Library was founded as a central library for Berlin in 1901 in Berlin-Mitte, which later became part of East Berlin. In its early years it was supported by the enthusiasm among some German librarians for the Public Library system of the United States. When West Berliners were no longer allowed to borrow from the Municipal Library in East Berlin following the division of the city, the local authority in West Berlin gratefully accepted an offer from the Americans to donate a library. Hence the America Memorial/Berlin Central Library, which was opened in West Berlin in 1951. Citizens of East Berlin were able to borrow from the America Memorial Library until the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 finally divided the city. In the following period, the two libraries pursued their separate paths but were still related to each other. In their openness, their vision of modern library practice, their user-oriented attitude and the breadth of the services they offered, they each played a leading role in librarianship in their respective parts of the city and beyond. Until 1989 the two libraries had roughly comparable figures for service levels, with 1.2m and 1.3m issues. After the fall of the Wall, East Berliners flooded to the America Memorial Library in West Berlin, as it was only there that they could find the contemporary Western literature that they wanted. Issues at the Municipal Library fell to a few hundred per day, while the America Memorial Library could scarcely keep up with demand, as users borrowed well over than 2 million books and audio-visual items per year. The two sister organisations lost their family likeness: bulk transactions and a high number of users in West Berlin, a sharp fall in usage in East Berlin. A factual situation, but one which reinforced the prejudices of the then 150 members of staff in East and West. When the Berlin authorities decided in October 1995 to unite the two institutions, each began to work on its own ideas of what the library service should be in order to attract for itself the required finances and development opportunities. A common path thus became hedged with mistrust.

B. The East-West conflict as generally present in Berlin and the defining aspects of this conflict in the unified Central and State Library.

Since 1995 the differences in the Eastern and Western outlook have been increasingly discussed. Crucial to this was the feelings each side experienced in their dealings with each other. After a first brief phase of euphoria about unification, changes began to occur in the course of collaborative work which lead to considerable amounts of friction, misunderstandings and problems. These were particularly prevalent in institutions where colleagues from East and West were united, as was the case with the Central and State Library. One study on the "German culture shock" listed five different stages of development in German-German relationships, beginning with euphoria, which was quickly followed by disillusionment and finally by recriminations. After that a first phase of understanding should begin, which accepts that there are mutual misunderstandings and can lead to a broader understanding, in which different ethical systems can be understood, learnt and respected1. These phases of understanding between East and West and their effect could be clearly recognised at the Central and State Library, even if the problems generally resulting from the merger of two organisations were overlaid or used.

1. Euphoria: After the fall of the Wall, there was mutual euphoria in visiting each other. East

Berlin staff got to know the West German book market, the publishing houses and the statutory regulations governing western libraries. Relationships were open and trusting, the West helped out the East with donations of books, equipment and extra money. Between the American Memorial Library and the Berlin Municipal Library it was also the Western example and Western help that ruled. Initial plans were made for a common future of equal partnership in one building. Due to retirements, both institutions acquired new leadership, from the West for the America Memorial Library and from the East for the Municipal Library.

2. Disillusion and mistrust: Disillusionment with each other set in throughout the city. Everyone became conscious of the differences in speech and behaviour between East and West. Similar concepts did not have the same meaning. The new common State did not only meet with approval in East and West. Economic enterprise was dominant in the West but in West Berlin in particular many people were very critical of the free market and supported social justice. However, they seemed to agree in their rejection of "Ossis": the business world accused East Germans of wanting to preserve their old social system with its job security among other things and thereby of hindering economic development, while workers accuse the Eat Germans of being worse than Western employers in concentrating on the pursuit of money with no thought for the social consequences. The East Germans had no chance, whichever way you looked at it. This West German superiority was unbearable for East Berliners. The situation with wages and salaries also promoted differences and prejudice. First of all the income supplement for West Berliners was cut. Then pay for East Berliners was matched to that of West Berliners - in return for longer hours of work and less holiday and Christmas compensation, however. So negative differentials remained. Just at this point the decision was taken to merge the two libraries into one foundation, and each of the libraries began working to defend its own characteristic aspects for the future and to try and convince the other side.

3. The third phase of mutual recrimination began. Reproaches began to be heard between the two libraries. The frank, highly critical and aggressive tone which had been used in discussions in the western half of the city for many years, including in the America Memorial Library, alienated and was rejected by colleagues from the East, who were used to resolving their differences in a different way. The merger into one institution lead to there being duplication at various levels in the management structure and required decisive action to be taken. Staff from the West were repeatedly preferred to those from the East. Each side's particular attitudes hardened: thus the East Berlin Municipal Library concentrated on high-value academic collections and the Western part regarded its increase in lending figures as the decisive criterion of quality. The situation in the East Berlin library was worsened by the fact many who had not fitted in in the old DDR system, many of whom had found a refuge in the library , criticised the others. The same people who had once supported the DDR Party line had once again got hold of important functions or had managed to get the best jobs. They had a better education, since they had been allowed to study, and in the new western State educational background had become a decisive factor in filling positions. So internal relationships in the East Berlin Municipal Library were also marked by these insecurities.

4. The first phase of understanding, where misapprehensions are recognised. Many attempts were made by both staff and management to alleviate the atmosphere of misunderstanding. A workshop at which members of staff explained to each other their way of looking at things and how it had developed was poorly attended but was a beginning. A statement on problems in the library's organisation at the beginning of 1997 allowed rather more of the unsuccessful initiatives and similar conceptions of the two organisations in the past to be seen, having been overlaid by current misunderstandings and prejudices. Such mutual exchanges of information slowly began to bring about changes in the situation. A careful phase of preliminary understanding began, even in there were frequent regressions to the third phase of recrimination.

5. The second phase of understanding, in which the respective ethical systems are understood, learnt and respected, has not really come into effect yet. Nothing will just happen by itself here, but mutual tolerance must be brought into play. If unity is to be achieved,

conscious changes must be made to the internal situation of the merged organisations.

C. Opportunities to resolve conflict.

Elements in the merging of businesses from differing commercial cultures can act as example for the unification of the two libraries. On the one hand the situation is worsened by the fact that all differences and also the private life of all the members of staff is constantly affected by the conflict between East and West in Berlin. Since the beginning of 1997 particular measures related to unification have been introduced which could mitigate the East-West conflict:

1. External leadership: the most important decision the political masters made was not to appoint the top layer of management from either of the two institutions. No matter how honourable and earnest anyone's intentions were, accusations of a take-over and of bias would have been around for years and would have skewed all discussions. It was therefore necessary to choose someone from outside to be in charge.

2. Complete neutrality. When asked to manage two merging organisations of such opposing natures, even a leader from outside has to demonstrate neutrality and equal consideration for both sides. This was difficult to put into practice, but had to be strictly adhered to. Even so there were complaints that one side was being favoured. Since they came from both sides, it seemed to balance out.

3. Common long-term goal. First of all a common objective, in this case a shared new building, had to be adopted, giving all developments a clear goal to aim for. Having one objective for everyone meant that the staff could begin to be reoriented in a new, shared, direction.

4. Short-term improvements in service with mixed staffing. The next decision was to establish common service provision in a different locations and hence to merge departments. This decision was very important since a careful but consistent mixing of staff led to changes in attitude.

5. Reaching understanding of different points of view by working together. While staff from the East who moved West soon adjusted to new tasks and fitted in, Western colleagues did not always manage to do so. They were not as welcome as they had hoped and had problems with the different way of reaching agreement. There was no overt criticism and they only discovered about problems they had caused afterwards. Probably no-one wanted to upset them. but this was completely misunderstood. They first had to learn that differences in opinion had been seen in the East as divisive and destructive rather than as a natural part of life in a democratic society.

6. Different clientele required different behaviour. The introduction of a large open access area in the East quickly attracted new readers to the Municipal Library. They were no longer pleading and submissive, but demanding and vocal. This behaviour was not acceptable to the Eastern staff who responded negatively. In the West, mainly older clients complained about the lack of a reading room, and that they received a less generous and expert service than before. Staff in the West had to learn how to deal with this. Both sides had to cope on a daily basis with many new problems and challenges.

7. Clear decisions, anticipation of difficulties resulting from compromises: Decisions had to be taken about common structures, a common classification, cataloguing practice and new work processes. There was always a tension in the air as to whether an Eastern or a Western solution would be preferred. Universal approval was always available for compromises which united aspects of both - whether these will however lead to more problems in the long run remains to be seen.

8. Improving the information culture. An individual's access to information was very

dependent on who she knew. Therefore a new discussion culture with a clear structure was introduced, which included those levels who had not previously passed on information received from higher up and which were now expected to transmit questions and information up the structure from below. The implementation of this process must be continually monitored, or it will be blocked by the various levels of hierarchy.

9. Conscious fostering of changes in behaviour to each other. After the first changes were put in to effect, changes in behaviour were also encouraged. Colleagues were to be treated in a friendly and equitable manner. This meant that the differences in the social significance of the West's critical discussions and the East's silent criticism had to be tackled. A new culture of discussion was therefore introduced, which immediately reprimanded any discussion that would hurt another person and fostered a more friendly yet open manner in dealing with each other.

10. Changing the nature of discussions. The different ways of discussing and of dealing with disagreements made a new way of conducting discussions necessary. The most important element is that a decision is not delayed by an exchange of opinions between those who are not directly involved in carrying it out, instead of the person responsible for implementing the decision receiving advice.

11. Delegating responsibility to the shop floor: To try and keep everybody happy, for a long time even matters of detail were referred to the top level for decision. If the differences between East and West are really to be set aside and staff are to participate actively in the process of changing their own library, decisions in the future should be taken at as low a level as possible. This will only become effective once decisions can be accepted irrespective of East and West.

12. Unanimity is neither achievable nor necessary, acceptability will do: In dealing with East and West and their different socialisations, it became clear that decisions in the library could no longer expect to receive universal approval, for example after a long discussion in the West or surface agreement in the East out of fear of disagreement. It was therefore important that everyone understood and accepted that people might hold very different opinions. The important thing is readiness to go along with a decision, to put it into effect and not to boycott it. We are still working on developing this, but we see it as offering a new way of managing that can guarantee that changes come into effect.

The Berlin Central and State Library thus began to turn the disadvantages of the East-West conflict into a new strength and to profit from the different capabilities of colleagues from East and West in making radical changes to the library, its organisation and its services.

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